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ABSTRACT

This brief paper describes the computerized mentoring program of Project DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) at the University of Washington. Introductory material notes the origins of the mentoring concept and the value of DO-IT mentors to their proteges. The program centers on providing mentoring via the Internet through electronic mail. A sidebar lists ways in which DO-IT mentors help proteges by providing information, contacts, challenges, support, direction, advice, and role modeling. Research on computer-mediated communication is reported, showing that such systems can be used to initiate and sustain both peer-peer and mentor-protege relationships. Project DO-IT proteges report that the Internet gives them support from peers and adults otherwise difficult to reach, connects them to resources, and allows them to communicate over great distances easily and inexpensively. Proteges also note that, when communicating via the Internet, people treat them equally because their disabilities are not immediately evident. Negative aspects reported by proteges include difficulties in clearly expressing ideas and feelings, technical difficulties, and lack of in-person contact. A second sidebar notes that DO-IT proteges offer their mentors challenges, opportunities to help set goals, a chance to share strategies, new ideas, and fun. The paper also lists contact and other information resources associated with Project DO-IT at the University of Washington. (DB)

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Opening Doors: Mentoring on the Internet

University of Washington
DO-IT

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Opening Doors: Mentoring on the Internet

Most of us can think of people in our lives, more experienced than ourselves, who have supplied information, offered advice, presented a challenge, initiated friendship, or simply expressed an interest in our development as a person. Without their intervention we may have remained on the same path, perhaps continuing a horizontal progression through our academic, career, or personal lives.

The term "mentor" has its origin in Homer's *Odyssey* when a man named Mentor was entrusted with the education of the son of Odysseus. "Protégé" refers to the person who is the focus of the mentor. Today, mentoring is associated with a variety of activities including teaching, counseling, sponsoring, role modeling, job shadowing, academic and career guidance, and networking.

DO-IT Mentors are valuable resources to their protégés in project DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology). Most Mentors are college students, faculty, practicing engineers, scientists, or other professionals who have disabilities. Protégés are participants in the DO-IT Scholars, Pals, or Campers programs. These students are making plans for post-secondary education and employment. They all have disabilities, including vision, hearing, mobility, and health impairments, and specific learning disabilities. Frequent electronic communications and personal contacts bring DO-IT protégés and mentors together to facilitate academic, career, and personal achievements.

Introducing protégés to mentors with similar disabilities is a strength of the DO-IT program. As reported by one protégé, she had never met an adult with a hearing impairment like hers before getting involved in DO-IT: "But when I met him, I was so surprised how he had such a normal life, and he had a family, and he worked with people who had normal hearing. So he made me feel a lot better about my future."

Participants learn strategies for success in academics and employment. Mentors provide direction and motivation, instill values, promote professionalism, and help protégés develop leadership skills. As one Scholar noted, "It feels so nice to know that there are adults with disabilities or who know a lot about disabilities, because I think that people who are about to go to college or start their adult life can learn a lot from mentors . . ." As participants move from high school to college and careers they too become mentors, sharing their experiences with younger participants.

There are probably as many mentoring styles as there are personality types and no one can be everything to one person. Each DO-IT participant benefits from contact with several mentors.

Most mentoring in DO-IT takes place via the Internet. Through electronic communications and projects using the Internet, mentors promote personal, academic, and career success. Electronic communication eliminates the challenges imposed by time, distance, and disability that are characteristic of in-person mentoring. For example, participants who have speech impairments or are deaf do not need special assistance to communicate via electronic mail. Those who cannot use the standard keyboard because of mobility impairments, use adaptive technology to operate their computer systems.

DO-IT encourages one-to-one communication between protégés and mentors via electronic mail. It also facilitates communication in small groups through the use of electronic discussion lists. For example, one group includes both mentors and protégés who are blind. They discuss common interests and concerns such as

DO-IT Mentors offer Protégés . . .

Information – Mentors share their knowledge and experiences with protégés.

Contacts – Mentors introduce their protégés to valuable academic, career, and personal contacts.

Challenges – Mentors stimulate curiosity and build confidence by offering new ideas and opportunities.

Support – Mentors encourage growth and achievement by providing an open and supportive environment.

Direction – Mentors help protégés discover their talents and interests and devise strategies to attain their goals.

Advice – Mentors make suggestions to help protégés reach their academic, career, and personal goals.

Role Modeling – Mentors accomplish many of these goals by letting their protégés know who they are.

independent living, speech and Braille output systems for computers, and options for displaying images and mathematical expressions.

While most communication occurs via electronic mail, some mentors meet their protégés during summer study programs at the University of Washington and at other DO-IT activities across the United States. In-person contact strengthens relationships formed on-line.

The DO-IT program received national recognition with The Presidential Award for Excellence in Mentoring "for embodying excellence in mentoring underrepresented students and encouraging their significant achievement in science, mathematics, and engineering." It was also showcased in the President's Summit on Volunteerism and received the National Information Infrastructure Award "for those whose achievements demonstrate what is possible when the powerful forces of human creativity and technologies are combined."

Research

DO-IT has been studying the nature and value of electronic mentoring since 1993. Thousands of electronic mail messages have been collected, coded, and analyzed; surveys were distributed to Scholars and Mentors; and focus groups were conducted.

Preliminary findings suggest that computer-mediated communication can be used to initiate and sustain both peer-peer and mentor-protege

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relationships and alleviate barriers to traditional communications due to time and schedule limitations, physical distances, and disabilities of participants. Both young people and mentors in the study actively communicate on the Internet and report positive experiences in using the Internet as a communication tool. The Internet gives these young people support from peers and adults otherwise difficult to reach, connects them to a rich collection of resources, and provides opportunities to learn and contribute. Participants note benefits over other types of communication. They include the ability to communicate over great distances quickly, easily, conveniently, and inexpensively; the elimination of the barriers of distance and schedule; the ability to communicate with more than one person at one time; and the opportunity to meet people from all over the world. Many report the added value that people treat them equally because they are not immediately aware of their disabilities. Negative aspects include difficulties in clearly expressing ideas and feelings, high volumes of messages, occasional technical difficulties, and lack of in-person contact.

Preliminary findings of this study suggest that peer-peer and mentor-protege relationships on the Internet perform similar functions in providing participants with psycho-social, academic, and career support. However, each type of relationship has its unique strengths. For example, peer-to-peer communication includes more personal information than exchanges between mentors and proteges.

It is often reported in the literature that peer and mentor support can help students with disabilities reach their social, academic, and career potential. However, constraints imposed by time, distance, and disability make such relationships difficult to initiate and sustain. This study suggests that practitioners and parents should consider using the Internet as a vehicle for developing and supporting positive peer and mentor relationships.

For more information about this study, contact the DO-IT office.

DO-IT Protégés offer Mentors . . .

Challenge – Mentors develop their own personal styles for sharing their skills and knowledge via electronic communication.

Opportunities to Help Set Goals – One Mentor explains, "I try to tell the DO-IT kids to listen to their hearts and think about what they really want to do. Don't listen to people who say no, you can't do this or that, or you should be thinking only about this kind of work; just think about what you really want to do, what turns you on, and go for it."

A Chance to Share Strategies – Mentors pass on hard-earned experiences. As reported by one Mentor, "I've been through this thing. I had a stroke and so on. And I find it incredibly gratifying to be able to share that with someone, and to be able to help someone else who's going through some of the same things."

New Ideas – Mentors join an active community of talented students and professionals with a wide range of disabilities who are eager to share their own strategies for problem-solving and success.

Fun – Mentors share in the lives of motivated young people. Listening to them, hearing about their dreams, helping them along the road to success – it's fun!

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Getting Started

Following are a few suggestions for new DO-IT Mentors.

- Get to know each protégé. What are his/her personal interests? Academic interests? Career interests?
- Introduce yourself. Share your personal interests, hobbies, academic interests, career path.
- Explore interests with protégés by asking questions, promoting discussion, pointing to Internet and other resources.
- Encourage participation in DO-IT activities and try to attend activities when possible. Mentor-protégé relationships are strengthened through face-to-face contact!
- Facilitate contact between students and people with shared interests or resources (e.g., professors, professionals, service providers, friends).

DO-IT Electronic Resources

To contact staff, request publications or ask questions about the program, send electronic mail to *doit@u.washington.edu*

The doitsem discussion list covers issues pertaining to individuals with disabilities and their pursuit of science, mathematics, engineering, and technology academics and careers. To send a message to the group use the address *doitsem@u.washington.edu*.

For information related to DO-IT, disabilities, adaptive technology, science, engineering, mathematics, and postsecondary education, access the DO-IT World Wide Web page at *http://www.washington.edu/doit/*

Videotape

A 14 -minute videotape, *Opening Doors: Mentoring on the Internet*, may be ordered by sending a check for $25 to DO-IT.

Grants and gifts fund DO-IT publications, videotapes, and programs to support the academic and career success of people with disabilities. Contribute today by sending a check to DO-IT, Box 355670, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-5670.

Your gift is tax deductible as specified in IRS regulations. Pursuant to RCW 19.09, the University of Washington is registered as a charitable organization with the Secretary of State, State of Washington. For more information, call the Office of the Secretary of State, 800-322-4483.

About DO-IT

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